

LETTER FROM ISRAEL

Sinai and After

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JERUSALEM

WE HAD just come home from a movie that Saturday night when the bell rang. I went to the door wondering who could be calling at that hour, and when I opened it I didn't recognize the young fellow standing there till I noticed the printed army call-up slip he held in his hand. One of the company messengers of my reserve unit, a student, if I remembered right. "I've been here twice already, but you weren't in," he said. "I noticed the light just now as I passed by again." I invited him in, and as we sat down to fill in and sign the slip we assured each other that this was just a routine call-up, one of the usual drills to test the effectiveness of the reserve system. Peculiar, though, that they told us to bring along warm clothes. "Well, you know," he said smiling, as he adjusted his tiny knit skullcap, the insignia of the almost emancipated, "they might keep us till late in the evening, and they wouldn't want us to catch cold!"

When we reported to our assembly point the next morning we were issued full equipment, uniforms, rifles—the works. Maybe the call-up wasn't so routine after all.

For the brief span of a week or so, the short, daring Sinai campaign released

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the eight-year charge of high tension every Israeli carries in him. Surprise turned to wonder, and wonder to exhilaration as the enemy receded, stubbornly in one place, melting away like a mirage in another, but receded. Every Israeli civilian-soldier had had occasion to observe the efficiency and clocklike precision of the army on his annual tour of reserve duty, but what of the enemy? He was still an unknown quantity. The Arabs had been incessantly repeating that they had learned the lesson of 1948, and as we knew from our own experience, you can do a lot in eight years. Ever since the summer of 1955, when the Russians started arming Egypt, the tension had been mounting; that great mass of arms weighed like an incubus on every Israeli's mind. The almost daily Arab threats of war culminated in Jordan's joining the Egyptian-Syrian Joint Command last October 24, on which occasion the Jordanian chief of staff declared: "The time and the place of the decisive battle against Israel will be fixed by Jordan and the other Arab states, and no chance will be given Israel to begin a battle whenever she chooses." Under these circumstances, with the Arabs set on a warlike solution, most Israelis felt that time was working against them, and that a showdown was inevitable. The question was the one the Jordanian chief of staff had put: who was to choose the time. Egyptian documents captured in Sinai—so the Israeli government says—indicated clearly that Nasser had scheduled his offensive for the spring of 1957.

The swift campaign exploded the myth of a resurgent Arab military power and laid the ghost of the second round.* The

*See "Story of the Sinai Campaign" by Leo Heiman in the January COMMENTARY.—ED.

Egyptian army was the most formidable of the Arab armies; equipped by the Russians, it far outdistanced Israel's in arms as well as numbers, but whatever it is that is required for effectiveness in modern warfare the Egyptians did not have it. Theirs was above all a failure of leadership, with the instances of officers deserting their men so numerous as to be symptomatic.

But the inept Anglo-French intervention served Nasser as a perfect excuse and cover-up for his Sinai debacle, and insured his remaining in power. There was also a gross failure of Israeli press relations. If *Time* could publish its interview with Nasser in its issue of December 10 with a straight face, then that failure was complete, for the facts were all there in the blazing Sinai sun, the thousands of prisoners, and the enormous quantities of equipment, so much of it Russian-made.

The Soviet reaction, and the exceptionally violent tone of Bulganin's letters to Ben Gurion, were exactly commensurate with the scale of captured Russian equipment. These letters produced a profound shock in Israel, a sort of trauma. Arab rantings are one thing, but Soviet threats are another matter, and Bulganin had been quite specific: "It [Israel] is sowing hatred of itself among the Eastern peoples; such as cannot but leave its mark on the future of Israel and places in question the very existence of Israel as a state." For Jews, genocide is no idle threat; their own recent experience and the very events going on in Hungary at the same time gave added point to Bulganin's note. In retrospect, the element of bluff in the Soviet threat has seemed more evident, but at the time it was only too easy to imagine the roar of Syrian-based bombers over Tel Aviv.

ABSORBED as they were in their immediate affairs and the excitement of the Sinai campaign, which they hoped, perhaps naively, would force a settlement with the Arabs, Israelis had to make an effort to focus their attention on the international scene, whence came an increasing weight of pres-

sure. Eight years of UN truce supervision had given Israel a rather jaundiced view of UN potentialities, and unless this experience is taken into account, the same errors are bound to be repeated. It is essential to remember that the Truce Supervision Organization in no way served to lessen tension, and did nothing whatever to prevent the flare-up which became inevitable, for there are conditions under which the status quo works inexorably for its own destruction, where standing still means waiting for the ground to be cut from under your feet. The UNTSO was an organization with its own vested interests, which did not necessarily jibe with a correct assessment of aggressors and victims. In order to continue existing it had to keep its books balanced, handing out good and bad marks with relative impartiality, now blaming one side and now the other for border incidents which it did little or nothing to prevent.

A young Hebrew poet* exactly expressed the Israeli attitude to the local UN command a while ago:

*The mediators, the peace-makers, the
compromisers, the conciliators,
Live in the white house
And receive their nourishment from afar,
Through oblique channels, through dark
veins, like an embryo.
And their secretaries are lipsticked and
laughing,
And their diplomatically immune chauffeurs
wait below, like stalled horses,
And the trees which shade them are rooted
in No Man's Land,
And the delusions are children who went
out to the field to pick cyclamens
And do not return.
And thoughts hover above, unquiet, like
scout planes,
And photograph and return and develop the
pictures*

*Yehuda Amichai, whose poem "Sonnet" appeared in our December issue. The poem here is called "The UN Command in Jerusalem," translated by Margalit Benaya. The UN headquarters in Jerusalem is in the former High Commissioner's mansion in No Man's Land.

*In dim and sorrowful rooms. . . .
And hopes come to me like daring seafarers,
Like discoverers of continents to an island
Where they stay a day or two
And rest . . .
And later sail away.*

It was the very nature of the UN's assignment which made it ineffectual; in some cases, by equalizations of its balance sheet, it actually precipitated crises. Above all, it had no effect on the underlying causes of the tension, and it did not even exercise a restraining influence. Furthermore, this balance sheet was tipped to one side or the other in line with the inclinations of the observer—the Bennikes and Hutchisons have indicated, after leaving UNTSO service, where their prejudices lay. Nor could one ignore, even at the top level, the difference in the implementation of UN directives: the energy with which Mr. Hammarskjöld is now insisting on the evacuation of the occupied territories is in bold contrast to the ignoring of the Security Council resolution requiring Egypt to let Israeli ships use the Suez Canal. Thus the idealization of the UN's function implied in the American reliance on the world organization in a region and in a situation where it had so patently failed to prevent a flare-up, seemed unrealistic and thoroughly quixotic.

Nothing was more frustrating, nothing seemed more outrageous to Israelis, than to see a possible settlement wrested from their hands in the name of restoring a situation which everyone had always agreed was impossible and explosive. What that restoration would mean had already become clear on December 2, when Cairo Radio announced that "the Fedayeen Headquarters have decided to carry out large-scale action during the coming winter season," and the next day the fedayeen attacks were renewed, from Jordanian bases, to continue ever since, with the Egyptians *claiming* full responsibility for the attacks (e.g. Cairo Radio's morning news broadcast of December 17). To return the Gaza Strip to Egyptian control under these circumstances would be no

great stroke of wisdom, and Ben Gurion told the Knesset on December 19, repeating his words six days later: "Israel will not agree under any circumstances to the return of the Egyptian invaders to the Gaza Strip." Popular feeling in Israel balked at the Sinai withdrawal, undertaken with no guarantees by Egypt of the ending of the Suez Canal blockade or fedayeen incursions—quite the contrary, as indicated above—and the quite moderate, independent daily *Ha'aretz* commented editorially on December 25 that "the restoration of the Gaza Strip to Egypt would result in the renewal of hostilities." Needless to say, what is true about the Gaza Strip applies all the more to the Gulf of Aqaba. Israel could hardly be expected to help arrange the re-imposition of the Egyptian blockade there. Much depends on the pressures to which Israel will be subjected, especially by the United States, but there is a point beyond which she cannot waive her vital interests; her survival is at stake.

ISRAEL's action in Sinai precipitated a world crisis, but the working out of that crisis was in the hands of the big powers. In a sense, the Israeli situation and the Arab-Israeli conflict are marginal issues in the broader context of the Middle East. On the other hand, the fate of the region as a whole, the working out of its burning problems, the direction—East or West—in which the Arab elites will pull or be pushed by their peoples, are inextricably bound up with the Arab-Israeli situation, which acts as a barometer warning of storms which have their origin elsewhere. The perpetuation of the Israeli-Arab conflict is essential to the Russians since it provides them with an excuse for intervention, with "volunteers" or otherwise.

While the explosion of the myth of Arab military power and political unity and the easing of the blockade were the most direct and important results for Israel herself, the Sinai campaign was no less significant for the West. It crystallized and clarified—perhaps the word is polarized—the real situation in the Middle East.

Eisenhower's request for Congressional

authority to send American military forces to the Middle East in the event of a Soviet threat to the area is evidence of the American recognition of this. But for Israel, the U.S.'s new Middle East policy—and especially its economic side—raises more questions than it answers. Will American economic aid prop up shaky feudal elites and dictators and perpetuate their power? Will American aid to Arab countries (Egypt and Syria) already having extremely strong economic ties with the Soviet bloc promote stability in the Middle East, or will it only increase the strain on an already strained social fabric? The President stressed that his plan did not apply to the Israeli-Arab dispute. Does that mean that a new policy in regard to this dispute is also being worked out in another context, or will it be allowed to slide, with no effort at a settlement? We may have the answers in the coming months, as the design comes out of the warp and woof of events. One can only hope that the questions will be approached afresh, and with a firmer grasp of Middle Eastern realities. Israel can hope that the identity of American and Israeli interests in the region will become more evident to U. S. policy-makers as time goes on, and that they will draw the inevitable conclusions.

Meanwhile, French assistance and support has given Israel relief from the cruel feeling of isolation which characterized her first eight years of existence. The mischief worked by Egyptian money, arms, and propaganda in North Africa awakened the French very early to the aggressive and expansionist nature of Nasserism. France may be only a medium power on the world scene, and perhaps less than that since the Suez sally, but for Israel, surrounded by the small Arab countries of the Middle East, her friendship is invaluable.

THE repercussions inside Israel of the Sinai campaign were rather milder than one might have expected—if we except, of course, the fortnight's dislocation caused by having most of Israel's men under arms. Perhaps a contributing factor has been that sort of

light schizoid trait in the Israeli character which no doubt comes from the eight years' (and longer) strain of living on the edge of war, subject to incessant marauding and infiltration. The Israeli's mind seems to be compartmented, with daily concerns getting full attention on one side, and with the overt threat and presence of danger dealt with separately. This seems to make possible a special absorption in one's daily tasks, a kind of relishing of them, so that the martial atmosphere does not affect work and daily living as much as one might expect it to. The ordinary Israeli reacted calmly to the outbreak of the Sinai war, and perhaps with a certain sense of relief, mingled with a natural concern for his friends and relatives in the armed forces. The younger generation of Israeli youth, those who had not been of age in 1948 and were raised on stories of the War of Independence, may be said to have welcomed the event. I think that a rather decisive break took place between the youth and the fellow-traveling Mapam party with the arrival of Bulganin's letters, and that the leaders of Mapam are now out of touch with the younger elements in their organization. Members of Hashomer Hatzair kibbutzim and youth movements openly joked about the tergiversations of their party's newspaper *Al Hamishmar*.

There was no hoarding of food or other necessities, for the government's assurance that it had provided ample stores for the emergency turned out to be true.

Unlike Western Europe's present oil shortage, Israel's has not been caused by the blocking of the Suez Canal—which has always been closed to her—but by Russia's cancellation of her trade agreement with her (whereby a third of Israel's oil requirements was supplied) and also by the shortage of tankers. As a result, one day of rest has so far been imposed on automobiles, which are also forbidden to travel outside their assigned areas (usually the home city and environs). However, the more immediate effects of the shortage are felt by electricity consumers, since Israel's power is produced by oil-fueled generators. Lighting is restricted to a single

40-watt bulb per room, and a three-room apartment is allowed 60 kilowatt hours a month. Reading one's electricity meter (not so simple as you think) has become a popular pastime, and the consumer is exalted or cast down according as he calculates a great reserve for himself or the prospect of having the current cut off.

The real response to the challenge of the fuel shortage, as well as to the Suez blockade, is the Elath-Beersheba 8-inch oil pipeline, on which work is already in progress, with several sections of the 150-mile line being built simultaneously. It is expected to be completed in six months, and, as the only oil pipeline running entirely through one country in the Middle East, should offer an alternative to Suez which, if taken up, would justify building a proposed 25-inch pipeline from Elath to Haifa.

The industry most immediately affected by the crisis was tourism, chiefly as a result of the State Department ban on Middle East travel by American citizens. At the time of writing, with the crisis quite over, the ban is still in effect. It also deprived Israel of the visit of the American Ballet Theater Company, which is a great pity, since Israelis have had almost no chance to see good ballet, the visit of the rather mediocre London Festival Ballet in the summer of 1956 having been their first contact with a professional company. On the other hand, Zino Francescatti and Francesco Molinari-Pradelli, the soloist and conductor invited to work with the Israel Philharmonic, stayed on through their engagements, playing to blacked-out houses filled to overflowing.

GENERALLY speaking, the after-effects of the Sinai campaign have accentuated weaknesses inherent in Israeli industry, further emphasizing the decline in exports and widening the gap between exports and imports. The credit squeeze, already tight to restrain inflation, became even more so. In agriculture the effects were even more serious; here again the credit squeeze made itself felt, and with a vengeance, since there has been a heavy over-investment in agriculture,

financed by short-term loans, which came roosting home for payment. Egg production and poultry breeding were hardest hit—affecting many new immigrant farmers who had invested in it—because of the stoppage of the shipment of American grain-feed on which this branch depended.

Even impassive Treasury officials admitted that taxation had reached the saturation point, and the Finance Minister himself supported easing of the tax burden for the middle-income brackets so that all incentive to higher productivity should not be stifled. It had taken Mapai a good many years to get around to this innovation. The proposal, opposed by the "equalizing" Ahdut Avoda and Mapam members of the coalition, would reduce the Treasury slice of every pound earned above the *middle*-bracket norm to a mere 70 per cent. Mapai also sponsored an anti-inflation measure aimed at the sacrosanct cost-of-living allowance; the proposal called for making allowance changes at longer intervals.

Book-lovers, students, and professionals needing books for their work finally lost their long battle with the Treasury. The low exchange rate obtaining for the dollar under the American Informational Media Guaranty program, a scheme for making books and cultural materials available at low cost which enabled the impecunious as well as the low-salaried professionals to satisfy their book hunger, was raised, making more expensive professional literature really prohibitive in price, and turning the better-class paperbacks (Anchor, Harvest, Meridian, Vintage, etc.), which had enjoyed a special vogue, into a temptation bordering on profligacy. The Treasury gave no convincing reason for the change, and claimed that the American authorities themselves were interested in reducing the enormous amount of books and periodicals absorbed by the Israeli public under the IMG scheme. Jerusalem booksellers (who know their customers personally) reported, when queried, that to their knowledge no Treasury official ever bought (or browsed among) their merchandise. This time the

hue and cry raised by the literate was of no avail, and there was a rush on the bookshops to take a last fling at the old prices.

THE blot on the record of Sinai is the Kafr Kassim curfew massacre. I have heard three versions of what happened there—and in other villages—and the fact that I cannot tell you reliably exactly what did happen is a sad comment on Israeli public relations. With no clear official version giving the results of the investigation, one can only imagine the worst, although the most authoritative version I have heard indicates that there were at least slightly mitigating circumstances. However, with the case *sub judice* and with no detailed official version—and in such a case the details are everything—one must remain in the dark for the present. In Israel we first heard of the number of the victims—forty-seven—only at second-hand, through a radio broadcast from Moscow. Ben Gurion did not even mention the number in his statement to the Knesset on December 12; this was about a month after life had more or less returned to normal. However, what he did say, that “I feel it my duty, on behalf of the government, the Police Force, and myself, to express our profound concern at the fact that such an act has been possible—an act that strikes a blow at the most sacred foundations of human morality drawn from Israel’s Torah,” is a sentiment shared by all thinking and feeling Israelis.

The Sinai campaign greatly enhanced Prime Minister Ben Gurion’s prestige and popularity (his appearance in news-reels being greeted with cheers), and he was supported by all parties except the Communists. The Sinai campaign itself had been an answer to the criticism of the Herut party, though with the beginning of the withdrawals from Sinai Herut demanded that they be stopped immediately, come what may. The obvious brilliance and success of the “new” young men of the Israeli general staff silenced critics from Ahdut Avoda, who had claimed that the retirement from the army of those of their members such as

Colonel Yigal Alon who had won fame in the War of Independence and Palmach would be harmful. A mixture of pride and anxiety was felt, moreover, about the way the top brass risked their own skins in Sinai.

For some months there had been talk of the creation of a united labor front which would include the three labor parties, Mapai, Mapam, and Ahdut Avoda, and the latter two were reported to have been pressing for it. However, Ben Gurion is understood to be shying away from the idea, at least for the present, as a result of the great personal popularity he won with the Sinai campaign. The long-drawn-out negotiations for a merger between Herut and the General Zionists ended in failure, but if a united labor front were created, then a merger between those two right-wing parties would become much more likely. In addition, though the campaign stole Herut’s thunder and took the wind out of Menahem Beigin’s sails, reverses in the international political arena could make Beigin’s rather jingoist line attractive to a sizable part of the politically immature new immigrants.

Nevertheless, it is important to emphasize the general sense of unity that has been felt by the nation as a whole since the Russian-Egyptian arms deal. However bitter the feeling about the withdrawal from Sinai without guarantees and the apparent slipping away of the fruits of victory that had been intended as bargaining counters for a peace with the Arabs, most Israelis have showed a mature understanding of the pressures from outside that have made retreat necessary. It was generally understood that the political struggle abroad following the military campaign was no less important than the outcome of the fighting itself, and this has tended to keep party politics (with the exception of Herut) relatively quiescent. It was the economic aftermath of the campaign that was expected to re-awaken party passions, but here too the situation has been fairly simple and straightforward, and there has not been too much room for debate. Furthermore, Mapai is carrying out the in-

come tax and cost-of-living allowance reform which the right-wing parties have long demanded. The economic situation had not yet crystallized at the time of writing, but it was clear that Israel was in for a period of austerity, especially with the impending reduction of American aid.

Meanwhile the religious parties, concentrating on their own parochial concerns, have scored a minor victory. The question of pig-breeding and pork-eating produced a rather ironical, if not comical, situation in Israel. The Knesset had evaded the responsibility for making a decision on this matter and left it to the local authorities. When the matter came up in the Tel Aviv Municipal Council, there were councillors who voted to forbid the sale of pork for reasons of conscience, while others voted to allow it—also for reasons of conscience. The anti-pork faction won, with no provision being made for the poor *goyim* living in our midst. Pseudo-porkophobes remarked that Israel would be the only country where a pig's life was inviolate.

The press also reported that the respective leaders of two rival Hasidic sects, stripped for ablution in a *mikvah*, started an argument about whether there had or had not been divine intervention in the Sinai campaign, and in the end came to blows.

The Communists, completely isolated and ostracized because of their opposition to the Sinai campaign—an attitude which was quite consistent with their long anti-Yishuv tradition—tried to exploit the Kafr Kassim tragedy to incite unrest among the Arabs in Galilee and the Triangle, but with little success.

WHAT then is the outlook in the long run? Barring big-power intervention and the possibility of being sucked into the whirlpool of a more general catastrophe—of which Israelis prefer not to think—it is still not rosy. Getting sudden call-ups, and going out for the annual tour of reserve duty, which is always a form of active service, since the danger is never merely hypothetical, one is often reminded of

Thucydides and the citizen's life in the Greek city state, the constant vigilance demanded, the perpetual insecurity to be allayed only by keeping one part of your mind awake and alert.

This is a wearying effort to maintain for years, without any prospect of relief. It also plays tricks with one's sense of perspective; perhaps with one's moral sense as well. With the Middle East a focal point of the renewed Cold War, Israelis will have to develop nerves of steel. The radio and the press will continue to report gestures of indifference or hostility from abroad, from over the borders and over the seven seas, usually threatening Israel's vital interests and often her very existence. After glancing at the afternoon paper pinned up at the kiosk, the Israeli will have to go on his way and get on with his everyday job. As economic pressures increase, he may have to accustom himself to a Spartan way of life (not that the Arabs are Athenians!). The last two or three years of relative comfort and abundance may become a delectable memory, may fade into a sybaritic legend. Stamina and cool-headedness will have to become ingrained traits; he will have to learn to brush away the hostile gestures looming from the news and take crises in his stride.

Perhaps the sort of schizoid temperament I referred to as characterizing the Israeli will be the decisive factor. His mind divided into two compartments, with a fragile membrane separating them, the Israeli goes about his daily tasks in the bright Mediterranean sun as if nothing else existed, while the other part registers the surrounding voices prophesying war. The nuclear squeak intruding on the ordinary American or European consciousness is a hi-fi booming Russian bass for the Israeli, threatening to swamp the quotidian sounds he longs for. For him, no illusion of roses without thorns. The reward of endurance is survival, and who knows, maybe, some day far off, a sort of peace, the kind that lasts for longer than a week or a month.